

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Mountains State Park is a unique and special place with a rich history. The park is located in the South Mountains Range, situated in the Piedmont Province near the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The park lies entirely within Burke County, south of the city of Morganton, and is adjacent to Cleveland and Rutherford counties. Recent acquisitions in the western area of the park, now known as the Clear Creek section, have increased the park's size to 17,481 acres, making South Mountains State Park the largest park in the state parks system.

The park's primary interpretive theme is the ecology of its outstanding resource waters. Secondary interpretive themes include plant communities, stream recreation, local cultural history, rare and endangered species, conservation ethic, park system history, reptiles, camping and back country safety, horseback riding, changing land-use patterns, and geology. A thorough site inventory and analysis was performed as a component of this planning process. Through this process, the project consultant and other stakeholders in the park gained a better understanding of the opportunities and constraints within the park and how these might influence site planning and development of new and improved facilities that will support the current interpretive themes.

The park has historically been focused on providing opportunities for backcountry experiences to the general public. The master plan for South Mountains State Park maintains this as a focus for the park. It provides for further conservation and protection of the park's unique lands and natural resources while establishing a blueprint for long-term development of facilities, recreation, and environmental education opportunities. In recognition of the sensitive natural resources and challenging topography, most of the park will remain natural and undeveloped.

The master plan outlines specific project opportunities within the three designated park sections: Jacob Fork, Henry Fork, and Clear Creek. The plan for the Jacob Fork section includes circulation and access elements, expanded tent and trailer camping, shower house facilities, picnic expansion, equestrian improvements, and improved facilities for maintenance and operations functions, among others.

The additional land acquired for South Mountains State Park within the Clear Creek section creates an opportunity to access the western part of the park. Based upon a joint agreement between the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, the master plan outlines a proposal for an environmental education center in this section that focuses on serving people of all abilities, with special attention to universal design for populations with special needs. Group overnight facilities will enhance the environmental education experience. In addition, the plan incorporates a day-use area including picnicking, pier, boat house, and walking trail around the existing lake.

Though planning is a dynamic process, the availability of more detailed information over time may result in a final built product that is different than that depicted in this plan. This plan presents a balanced approach for a clear development plan and guide for future activities and recreational opportunities while meeting the mission of the state parks system to conserve and protect the park's significant resources and provide for environmental education opportunities about the natural heritage of this park.